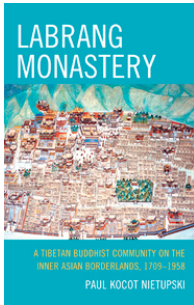


REVIEW: *LABRANG MONASTERY*

Reviewed by Christina Kilby Robinson (University of Virginia)



Nietupski, Paul Kocot. 2011. *Labrang Monastery: A Tibetan Buddhist Community on the Inner Asian Borderlands, 1709-1958*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers. xxxi+272. Three maps (vii-ix), Family History: Gönpö Döndrup and Pronunciation and Word Lists, with Tibetan transliteration, bibliography, index. A publication of the *Studies in Modern Tibetan Culture* series. ISBN: 978-0-7391-6443-3 (hardcover, 80USD), 978-0-7391-6445-7 (ebook, 80USD).

Nietupski's latest monograph is a rigorous study of Labrang (bla brang) Tibetan Buddhist Monastery and its surrounding communities in present-day southern Gansu Province. Employing a rich array of sources from Chinese government archives, Tibetan monastic literature, American missionary records, and over a hundred oral interviews, Nietupski crafts a multi-faceted historical overview of Labrang as a center of religious and political power within a multiethnic community facing conflict and change.

Readers of Nietupski's (1999) publication based on the Griebenow Archives will applaud the depth and substance of his newest book. Here, Nietupski redoubles his research efforts to expand his previous book on two main fronts: first, he extends his temporal scope from an early twentieth century emphasis (1921-1949) to a full two and a half centuries of life at Labrang (1709-1958); second, he shifts his focus from family histories to social history, making extensive use of archival and institutional sources. The result is a satisfying, macro-historical presentation of greater Labrang that complements the micro-historical approach of his 1999 publication. Taken together, Nietupski's two Labrang monographs comprise a singular achievement that should soon be widely emulated within the field of Tibetan Studies.

In his introduction, Nietupski offers a thesis – that at the crossroads of cultures, the greater Labrang community successfully maintained a Tibetan Buddhist identity – as well as a compelling insight into "border and frontier cultures" at large. Contemporary discussion of minority polities in the Qing era often relies on a center-periphery binary framework, but Nietupski instead applies the idea of the 'border' to argue that a peripheral or frontier power can become a center in its own right precisely because of its situation within a dynamic zone of difference. "In the case of Labrang, because of its size, its pedigree, and prestige, its sense of sovereignty was amplified by being juxtaposed to different sovereign powers; the very fact of being located on a border served to develop a powerful sense of unity of self and exclusion of other" (xvi). It is within this contested context of pluralism, Nietupski argues, that Labrang Monastery rises as a local sovereign power and a trans-regional political player.

Chapter One (Amdo: An Overview) offers an historical introduction to the Amdo Tibetan cultural region that encompasses much of present-day Qinghai and Gansu provinces. This chapter highlights the development of Tibetan Buddhist institutions in Amdo, the long-term ethnic Mongol influence in the region, and the political turmoil in central Tibet that formed the backdrop for Labrang's founding and early survival.

Chapter Two (Tibetan Religions in Amdo) details the institutional structure of Labrang: its colleges, its curriculum, its offices, and the various forms of Buddhist intellectualism, ritual practice, and community service in which Labrang monastics engaged. In particular, Nietupski sketches the literary career of one of Labrang's intellectual luminaries, the third Gungtang Tenpé Drönmé (Gung thang bstan pa'i sgron me, 1762-1823). Nietupski also offers a glimpse into the unusual integration of a Nyingma (Rnying ma) college of lay tantric adepts into Labrang's Géluk (Dge lugs) administrative structure. Discussion of Labrang's adjacent nunneries and their position within the Labrang institutional landscape remains an important task for future research.

Chapter Three (Labrang's Society) presents what is perhaps the most valuable research contribution of the book: a detailed

description of the social and political divisions of greater Labrang and its nomadic populations. Nietupski outlines numerous terminologies for offices and social units, discusses the interface between monastic and lay bureaucracies, and details Labrang's systems of estate management, agricultural production, taxation and corvée enforcement, dispute resolution, and militia operation. The theme of Labrang Monastery hierarchs acting simultaneously as political arbitrators, economic managers, and religious figureheads resounds throughout this chapter. Nietupski's rendering of the complex composition of Labrang society provides a valuable case study of the socio-political functions of Buddhist monasteries and contributes to the growing literature on the subject (e.g., Pichard and Lagirarde 2003, Gunawardhana 2009, Walsh 2009, and Prasad 2011).

In Chapter Four (Growth and Development: The Evolution of Labrang Monastery), we read a history of the major reincarnation lineages at Labrang and biographical summaries of the careers of the Jamyang Zhépa (‘jam dbyangs bzhad pa) and Gungtang lamas, with special attention to their management of interethnic conflict and tolerance of religious diversity. Chapter Five (Twentieth-Century Labrang) explores the growing political instability and violence between Tibetans and Muslims that marked Labrang's experience of the Chinese Republican period. Here we see a stronger focus on the leading Alo Clan, their experiments in public education and modernization, and their transition from Nationalist into Communist politics. The conclusion, Chapter Six (Visions and Realities at Labrang), engages difficult questions of identity and sovereignty, arguing that even in the midst of intricate diplomatic relationships with powerful neighbors, Labrang maintained its authority and the Tibetan Buddhist worldview on which that authority rested.

This work models the depth and breadth of research that is possible when one site is embedded in primary sources representing multiple language groups and diverse vantage points. Still, while Labrang Monastery's situation at the nexus of such varied source material is exceptional, its social and economic complexity is more the norm than the exception among Tibetan religious institutions. This work should quickly become essential reading for students of Tibetan religion, history, and anthropology. As a "search for place," which Sørensen et al. (2007) define as "a method that seeks to

combine texts and ethnography, in an attempt to establish what we may term historical geography," *Labrang Monastery* overwhelmingly succeeds. Those involved in the "search for place" in other regions will benefit from Nietupski's model of diligent and thorough exploration encompassing both the high ideals and the lived realities that together make a "place."

REFERENCES

- Gunawardhana, P. 2009. *Buddhist Monasteries Toward Urbanism in Southern Sri Lanka*. Battaramulla: Neptune Publications.
- Nietupski, P. 1999. *Labrang: A Tibetan Buddhist Monastery at the Crossroads of Four Civilizations*. Ithaca: Snow Lion.
- Pichard, P and F Lagirarde (eds). 2003. *The Buddhist Monastery: A Cross-Cultural Survey*. Paris: Ecole française d'extrême-orient [French School of the Far East].
- Prasad, B (ed). 2011. *Monasteries, Shrines, and Society: Buddhist and Brahmanical Religious Institutions in India in Their Socio-Economic Context*. New Delhi: Manak Publications.
- Sørensen, P, G Hazod and Tsering Gyalpo. 2007. *Rulers on the Celestial Plain: Ecclesiastic and Secular Hegemony in Medieval Tibet: A Study of Tshal Gung-Thang*. Veröffentlichungen zur Sozialanthropologie Bd. 10. Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften.
- Walsh, M. 2009. *Sacred Economies: Buddhist Monasticism and Territoriality in Medieval China*. New York: Columbia University Press.